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ABSTRACT

This paper challenges traditional perspectives of professional development through a reconceptualization of early childhood professional growth. A review of the early childhood professional development literature reveals the problematic nature of the linear perspectives and deficit models of staff development prevalent in the early childhood field. In contrast to these models, the paper proposes alternative perspectives that recognize staff as empowered learners who build their working knowledge through spirals of engagement with many aspects of early childhood philosophy and practice over time. To illustrate the challenges to the dominant professional development paradigm, the paper discusses the professional development components of an Australian study of early childhood centers that began with off-site researcher-led inservice workshops and was followed by on-site staff-led discussion. The study involved approximately 75 staff members from 12 early childhood centers who participated in collaborative rethinking of approaches to planning and working with young children and their families. This approach to professional development was sustained by ongoing support of the researchers as critical friends who facilitated staff engagement through a sense of personal and professional agency. The approaches explored in this paper propose a constructivist view of professional growth that acknowledges the unique contribution of the personal professional knowledge of individuals and the importance of the orientation of individuals both to their work and to new ideas. (Contains 24 references.) (Author/LPP)

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Abstract

This paper challenges traditional perspectives of professional development through a reconceptualization of early childhood professional growth. A review of the early childhood professional development literature reveals the problematic nature of the linear perspectives and deficit models of staff development prevalent in the early childhood field. In contrast to these models, the paper proposes alternative perspectives that recognize staff as empowered learners who build their working knowledge through spirals of engagement with many aspects of early childhood philosophy and practice over time. To illustrate the challenges to the dominant professional development paradigm, the paper discusses the professional development components of an Australian study of early childhood centers that began with off-site researcher-led inservice workshops and was followed by on-site staff-led discussion. The study involved approximately 75 staff members from 12 early childhood centers who participated in collaborative rethinking of approaches to planning and working with young children and their families. This approach to professional development was sustained by ongoing support of the researchers as critical friends who facilitated staff engagement through a sense of personal and professional agency. The approaches explored in this paper propose a constructivist view of professional growth that acknowledges the unique contribution of the personal professional knowledge of individuals and the importance of the orientation of individuals both to their work and to new ideas.

Introduction: A Context for Professional Growth

How does educational change occur for staff in the early childhood field when the curriculum content is not centrally mandated and the people involved have varying employer and work contexts? To explore that question, this paper reviews the early childhood professional development literature and proposes alternative perspectives that recognize staff as empowered learners who build their working knowledge through spirals of engagement over time. The issues raised by different perspectives are illustrated by a study that relates to the nature of curriculum decision making in settings for children ages 0-5 years in the Sydney region of New South Wales, Australia. The

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research has provided an impetus for rethinking early childhood professional development. Insights gained from involvement in the study reinforce the importance of recognizing the complexity of personal professional growth, particularly in the context of philosophical and pedagogical challenges from a rapidly changing field.

The current Australian sociopolitical context has tended to create an early childhood field in which staff feel underpaid and demoralized. It is therefore surprising to find—at the same time—a climate of intellectual inquisitiveness generating engagement with the complexities of reconceptualizing teachers' work. Dissatisfaction with current practices has provoked a wave of interest in alternative approaches to teacher planning that transcend the technicalities of simple record keeping. This practitioner energy inspired the researchers to participate in the dialogue about planning with practitioners in the field while investigating the context of professional growth.

Linear Perspectives

Spodek (1996) notes that the term "professional development" is ambiguous (p. 115). In an attempt to confront this ambiguity, it is valuable to review several dominant models of early childhood professional development. Several authors are key reference points. These include Katz (1977), VanderVen (1988, 1990), and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 1994), each with a slightly different perspective. Katz (1977) described teachers in terms of their predominant concerns, in sequential order from self through to the profession at large. This *concerns-based model* of teacher development described teachers in terms of four stages from survival to maturity.

Rather than using individual concerns as the frame of reference, NAEYC (1994) focused on *qualifications* as a key discriminator. It proposed six levels of professional development from that of people starting competency-based or degree-oriented training through to the achievement of doctoral-level qualifications. NAEYC (1994) also offered nine principles of effective professional development.

In 1988, VanderVen described a five-stage *developmental sequence* towards professionalism (from novice to influential). She argued that the "development of professionalism is related to practitioner ability to assume the roles necessary to deliver the various functions of the field" (p. 138). This conceptualization focused on the differentiation of roles and the amount of supervision required for effective practice, while proposing a sequential model of the development of "professionalism." Spodek (1996) described VanderVen's stages of professional development as "ecologically based," building on Bronfenbrenner's conception of systems (e.g., orientation to the micro or the macro). VanderVen (1990) later proposed sets of adjectives that describe different responsibilities of staff on a three-stage career development track. The definition of "professionalism" vis-à-vis "professional development" is, at this point, problematic.

Challenging the Linear Perspective

The conceptualizations in VanderVen's papers (1988, 1990) seem to be framed by (and

perhaps limited by) the American experience. "Professional development" carries different meanings in different circumstances. American early childhood settings have strikingly different cultural and contextual frames of reference than do those in Australia. For example, while it is easy to agree that "there are many gaps and discontinuities in the development of professionalism vis-à-vis today's workforce in early childhood education" (VanderVen, 1988, p. 157), it is more difficult to agree with the subsequent claim that "this is particularly apparent for the large novice-stage group, whose members provide a great amount of direct service, but whose potential for professional growth is in many instances modest" (p. 157). This statement seems a damning indictment of human potential, but it may be relevant for the context in which it was written.

Across the centers involved in the research reported later in this paper, there are staff members with minimal "professional preparation" or qualifications who, nevertheless, demonstrate insight and commitment to engage in ideas that are synonymous with professional growth. This situation is not a claim that the networked, informal professional involvement described in this study should replace or be equated with more formal study to gain qualifications. There is, however, an argument that a linear conception of professional development that equates with such study and qualifications is overly simplistic.

Saracho and Spodek (1993) analyzed and reviewed literature in the field of early childhood teacher professional development. While proposing suggestions for improvement in the existing conceptualizations, they did not offer a critique of the assumptions underlying the dominant "stages" conceptions. VanderVen (1994) analyzed and redefined the early childhood profession as contextual rather than linear. Nevertheless, the concept of professional development that she advocated still has a focus on the "transfer of knowledge and skills" (p. 86) rather than having a priority on socially constructed knowledge.

Rodd (1997) took on this challenge and argued:

> Some current approaches to professional development, such as those of Katz (1977) and VanderVen (1990), appear to take a Piagetian perspective, arguing that early childhood professionals need to develop in order to learn. Yet it could be argued that continued improvement in the quality of early childhood service provision appears to be more related to the Vygotskian (1962) perspective, where early childhood professionals...are supported by their colleagues, to learn in order to develop. (p. 1)

Piagetian conceptions suggest individuals in isolation moving along a qualification track, assuming a logical sequence of steps that require the transmission of skills to "develop." These seem to underestimate the complexity of possible processes and variation in individual experience. There are, however, other frames of reference that provide alternative perspectives to the concept of professional development.

Empowered Learners

Rather than conceptualizing professional development as either enabling participation in formal upgrading of qualifications (an approach that might be seen as ticking off the boxes involved in getting a piece of paper) or as providing steps towards acquiring a

recommended change in practice (perhaps a mandated curriculum document), other possibilities may be more useful. For example, the recognition of staff as owners of personal professional knowledge, with intellectual and emotional investment in possible contributions to their own development, seems to be undervalued in much of the "stages" literature. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) wrote extensively on the importance of recognizing and valuing teachers' knowledge. A recognition of agency (Paris, 1993) is also missing from the sequential, qualifications-oriented approach to staff development.

Jones (1994) and Yinger and Hendricks-Lee (1993) emphasize the contributions of the learner. While Jones celebrates the valuing of teachers' stories, Yinger and Hendricks-Lee investigate "the nature and characteristics of what we often call 'working knowledge' that is, knowledge particularly useful to get things accomplished in practical situations" (p. 100). These orientations value the background and understandings that adults bring to their work. Clark (1992) supports this perspective in his statement: "Research on teacher thinking supports the position that teachers are more active than passive, more ready to learn than resistant, more wise and knowledgeable than deficient, and more diverse and unique than they are homogenous..." (p. 77).

He concludes that the responsibility for professional development must, therefore, be given to teachers themselves. It is not clear whether his assertion would extend to staff with limited qualifications or background in early childhood services, but the basic humanity and respect that are reflected in his position are noteworthy.

Part of the difficulty in attempting to comprehend approaches to early childhood professional development relates to status issues in the field. In relation to potential development of early childhood innovations, Rust (1993) states that one of the obstacles that must be confronted "is that early childhood education is not widely recognized as a distinct and well-articulated field of education. It is perceived as 'women's work,' with concomitant low status and low pay" (p. 104). These observations relate to sociopolitical contexts that must be integrated conceptually into models of professional development, rather than assuming that programs can proceed in "a context-free zone."

The literature on "teacher voice" adds to this argument. Ayers (1992) writes that "recovering the voice of the teacher—usually a woman, increasingly a person of color, often a member of the working poor—is an essential part of reconceptualizing the field of early childhood education" (p. 266). This recognition of the importance of valuing the learner's perspective and orientation relates well to an underlying philosophy of empowerment.

Ayers (1992) continues:

> Policymakers and scholars tend to speak for teachers, never with them. The question, "what can these teachers tell one another and the world about teaching and about children?" has largely been ignored in favor of more distanced questions, such as "How shall we explain what these teachers ought to know and what it must be like for them?" (p. 266)

His stance mirrors what we know about the nature of adult learning from the perspective of reflective practice and of valuing ownership of the process. It also helps to rectify the gaps in understanding that emanate from recognition of dominant groups to the exclusion of minorities.

A number of writers have identified the importance of individual responsibility for professional development within a supportive environment. For example, Duff, Brown, and Van Scoy (1995) explain: "Just as self-initiated activity is critical to the child's development, so are reflection, self-evaluation, and self-direction critical to the process of professional development" (p. 83). They argue that "many individuals within a collaborative work environment are intrinsically motivated to improve their professional competence" (p. 85). This recognition of the importance of the work environment is included in the early childhood management perspective of Bloom, Sheerer, and Britz (1991), who also focus on individual staff development. They provide a persuasive argument to encourage center directors to support staff members in their attempts to develop a "comprehensive and personalized staff development action plan" (p. 93). To accomplish this end, staff must "understand their own professional growth needs and strengths as contributing members to the center in which they work" (p. 106).

Similarly, Seng (1998) and Robert (2000) support individual approaches that build on strengths and respond to personal and professional needs rather than supporting traditional inservice training directed towards teaching competencies. Individual planning meetings to explore professional development opportunities are offered as a key component to Seng's approach. Personal vulnerability must be recognized in this context. Marsick and Watkins (1992) note that "adults have worked hard to become who they are; continuous learning demands that they continuously unlearn past lessons and become anew, which leaves them vulnerable" (p. 12). This reminder relates well to Bloom et al.'s suggestions for supportive directors' strategies.

Within this discussion of facilitative contexts, it is useful to acknowledge the nature of interactions between practitioners and "the professional developers" (often academics or systemic personnel). These interactions may vary on a continuum from distanced and hierarchical to collegial and collaborative. This relational aspect of professional development is often overlooked in consideration of possible professional development approaches. This area would benefit from further study in early childhood contexts.

The Sydney Study

Methodology

This study, conducted in early childhood settings for children ages 0-5 in the Sydney region of New South Wales, Australia, is included to exemplify the challenges to the dominant professional development paradigm. In this case, the professional development opportunities can be linked to a paper that invited the field to revisit accepted planning approaches (Fleet & Patterson, 1998). It situated planning processes within a larger sociocultural context and, among other things, challenged staff to consider worthwhile knowledge emerging from genuine interactions with children as a source for planning.

The authors presented information in workshop sessions related to shifts in pedagogical theories about work with young children and their families. Following a presentation about current thinking, staff participated in small-group sessions revisiting their practices and considering their work in the light of theoretical information presented. An opportunity was then provided for participant involvement in an ongoing study of

planning processes through a request to invite the researchers to three regularly scheduled center planning meetings. These requests received a positive response from approximately 1 in 10 of participating centers. Those accepting the offer included staff who were confident about their current approaches as well as those who were rethinking practices. Approximately 75 staff members from 12 early childhood centers participated.

This stage of the research continued over 18 months. The researchers made repeated visits to 12 centers to attend planning meetings. The staff were not observed as "others," but included the researchers in ongoing discussions. This collaboration provided opportunities for professional development for both early childhood staff and researchers through philosophical discussions and practical decision making about planning and programming for children and relationships with families. Thus, there is a sequence of professional development opportunities from the publication of the original ideas, to ongoing workshops and conference presentations, to participant observation data gathering at the shared planning meetings.

Data collected included site notes, transcripts, and debriefing notes from researcher interpretative conversations after leaving the meetings. The site notes included information about the layout and provisioning of the educational environments, children's work, professional examples of recording formats, and observations of the interactions between staff and families. The meeting transcripts were returned to participants for verification, and several groups used the transcripts as springboards for further planning meetings. Contextual data and conversations were continually analyzed for emergent themes. Drafts of papers returned to staff also generated comment and insights that contributed to joint rethinking of emerging concepts and directions.

Subsequently, staff members were invited to be interviewed individually by a research assistant to enable perspectives to be stated that might not have been evident in the group planning meetings. The interviews included discussion about the usefulness of the researchers as collaborative participants as well as exploration of changes and the change processes themselves.

Findings

This study provided an opportunity to investigate components of a professional development sequence that began with off-site researcher-led inservice workshops and was followed by on-site staff-led discussions. The revisiting of professional provocations across sites and over time encouraged spirals of engagement with many aspects of early childhood philosophy and practice. Center-based staff and university-based researchers were all able to gain greater understanding through recursive cycles of investigation and problematizing of taken-for-granted staff behaviors. This approach to professional development was sustained by the support of the researchers as critical friends (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) who facilitated staff engagement through a sense of personal and professional agency.

Analysis of the data indicated the significant role of directors who lead staff in a culture of inquiry. In particular, the focus on the Sydney study as an example of rich professional development highlighted the importance of (1) valuing the learners' perceptions and knowledge in shaping the nature of inservice opportunities, (2) building on affective components including professional affirmation and personal motivation, and

(3) encouraging learner engagement by focusing on substantive, relevant content.

Melissa (a preschool director) reported that "the original meetings helped me develop an interest…so I have actually researched a lot of that this year. And that led to me organizing my time with the children better." Her comments reflect the opportunity to be involved in pedagogical encounters premised on valuing what the learner brings to the discussion, rather than predetermining outcomes. They also reflect a professional development philosophy that meets the learner at a point of interest. An important component of this approach to professional empowerment relates to attitudinal factors associated with affirmation and motivation. One toddler teacher commented, "You get stale sometimes and it has brought back that excitement…. Okay, we've done a good job; it's nice to hear that from other professionals."

Learner engagement presumes that the content of the pedagogical exchange is "worth knowing," that there is substance that requires moving beyond superficial behaviors. In this case, the work was embedded in principles of early childhood practice (Fleet & Patterson, 1998) that were valued by participants and seen as meaningful. For example, in referring to the authors, Annalise (a toddler teacher) commented,

> I was really impressed by the way they explained and talked about things that were meaningful in a child's life. They gave lots of examples and how that extended out; there were so many different branches to extend the child's thinking processes. I think it was good that they were thinking of different ways of taking us further into the future…we need to use our own minds because what might work here might not work elsewhere.

This valuing of relevant examples based on local contexts reflects the perception of integrity of content.

Subsequent interviews of staff by a research assistant added depth to the researchers' conceptualization of professional empowerment through spirals of engagement and confirmed the value of moving beyond traditional views of professional development. This conception can be characterized by the researchers' philosophy that values the learner's space, an affirmation of the learner's work, content that has personal and professional relevance as well as intellectual integrity, and the support of critical friends. These characteristics are evident in the voices of the staff who shared their insights with the interviewer.

Critical Friends

The final component of this characterization of professional empowerment resides in the importance of the role of "critical friends." In this study, the researchers acted as critical friends while participating in center-based staff meetings. The Sydney study highlights four different aspects of the relationship between staff and the researchers, which analysis of the interview data indicates that participants saw as important.

First, there was the importance of "an outside voice" to offer a new perspective on the work in the center. In speaking about the visits by the researchers, Lynne (a preschool staff member) commented,

> It gives us a chance to stop and reflect and evaluate as a whole. You know, answering to someone outside of "just us." It's been interesting. Sometimes they may raise issues that you mightn't have even thought of, or new ideas or challenges. And it's great getting that outside

> perspective too.... I think every center could do with that fresh approach.

Second, critical friends were valued for the positive feedback on work that was being undertaken in the center. For example, one staff member commented, "the biggest thing was the thought that we are on the right track, and they [the researchers] supported that what we were doing was positive and worthwhile." Third, staff indicated that they felt they had been given permission by the authors to try different ways of approaching professional practice. For example, at one center, the director noted, "They have assisted in making us feel more confident to change...that we can actually do it. Here are people who know more than us, saying, 'that's okay, you can do these things.'" At the same center, a teacher commented, "They put some questions to us that started us thinking about new ways we could develop on our own." Finally, the role of the researchers as "critical friends" included the asking of questions that challenged and extended thinking. As the director of a center, Susan, said, "Their suggestions have been very helpful, and I think there are things you don't think of yourself...and it's probably making me think more laterally about what we're doing." Annalise added, "I think you need people like that to come along and say, 'Okay, what are you up to? What about this? What about that?' New ideas are fantastic and exciting and pull the team together."

The combination of these characteristics resulted in a richness of experience for the staff who were involved. The opportunity to explore ideas over time enabled staff to revisit possibilities for exploration. This spiraling of engagement is a truly professional growth process. In her reflections, Annalise said,

> Those meetings we had were predominantly about planning and programming...the difficulties we had along the way...and when they came to visit we presented all our ideas. They praised us of course (as we expected that they would), and, um, then we were wondering if we really liked it. So as soon as they left, we threw all that out the window! When we were explaining it to them, we were like, "no that's not what we really want." So the next week we had a totally new idea, and we worked on that for not even a week, and we scrapped that model. So we went through quite a lot preparing ourselves to explain what we wanted. And that was just another part of the process. Because I think if we were doing it independently, we wouldn't have to explain, so we would have just thought it was right. But actually explaining it on a professional level, to someone who didn't know what we were doing, made us think about and understand what we really wanted with our planning and programming.

If one of the goals of professional development is the achievement of growth as reflected in reconceptualization of previous practices, then the sequence described here has been useful. Analysis of the data indicates that staff in most centers were modifying their practices or accepting the challenge of reflecting on their current approaches. There were staff members at two centers who offered to share their planning processes with the researchers, but who did not engage subsequently with the provocations for change. It seemed as though the challenges offered at the workshops were not perceived as relevant for these centers. For example, Tina (a preschool staff member) added a dissonant voice to the otherwise positive interview data. She mused,

> I guess with the meetings, I was thinking that we were going to learn a lot more from them...um...and a few times when questions were asked, we thought they weren't sort of answered. We were put off track because they sort of put it back onto us....I felt a bit...because I really wanted to know more....I just, I don't know, I couldn't see how it was all happening.

As might be expected, fluid approaches to promoting professional growth do not meet

everyone's expectation. Some individuals may be used to transmission models of instruction and find interactive approaches disappointing, perhaps inadequate for their perceived needs.

If a director has not promoted reflective pedagogical dialogue, staff members may also lack the confidence or feel ill prepared to contribute to exchanges arising from pedagogical provocations or to link practice to theory in an explicit way. Directors who see themselves as leaders rather than managers have a key role in supporting staff as learners. This study indicates that facilitative directors support formal study by staff, expect discussion of ideas and approaches to planning, value the contribution of children and families, and provide time for professional reflection.

In centers where change occurred, data indicated that important elements in the process included facilitative work environments influenced by the director's leadership style (Fleet & Patterson, in press) and team discussions that provided opportunities for the social construction of knowledge. The commitment and enthusiasm of staff to rethinking their practice in the light of the nonprescriptive provocations offered in workshops and planning meetings highlight the value of flexible approaches to professional development.

Rethinking Current Approaches

Issues arising in the literature and in this study challenge us to rethink approaches to early childhood professional development. Each individual's experience of professional development is complex, unpredictable, and dependent on contextual influences. Limiting the discussion to "teacher inservice development" for example misrepresents the richness of growth contexts and overlooks the diversity of staff in early childhood centers.

It is salient to acknowledge the importance of a balance of peoples' skills, qualifications, backgrounds, and potential contributions to the life of the center. Degreed staff, particularly in director's positions, have key leadership roles to fulfill. A strong regulatory environment is necessary to maintain that aspect of quality. Nevertheless, professional development opportunities can usefully be explored outside the status/wages arguments. There is a tendency in the professional development literature to adopt a perspective that less-qualified people at the bottom of a staffing hierarchy "need to be developed." A contrary view is that all staff members can become more sophisticated in their understandings regardless of the starting point, given commitment, opportunity, and facilitative contexts.

There are many possible avenues for developing professionally. Individuals do not expand their thinking or change their practice in linear or evenly paced stages. In addition, variations in qualifications and experience must be considered in terms of people understanding and accepting the challenge of new ideas, including the willingness to put in the time and commitment necessary to reevaluate practice. While professional qualifications are essential for the quality of a children's service, the Sydney study suggests that staff with few formal qualifications may demonstrate as much insight and commitment to rethinking their own practice as do some of their colleagues who have more experience and formal qualifications.

In rethinking current approaches to professional development, it is also important to problematize the content of professional development experiences. As Kwong and Kwong (2000) note, traditional models of professional development privilege theories over practice, while practitioners tend to privilege practice over theories. To overcome this dichotomy, Kwong and Kwong advocate a dialectic mode of linking theory and practice. This focus on the dialectic provides recognition of the learner's perspective while also valuing discipline knowledge. It is a focus that is reflected in this study within the interplay of discussions between the staff and researchers. The center-based discussions enabled the counter-positioning of daily practice with accepted beliefs, the exploring of tensions between statements about guiding theories and demonstrated approaches to work with children and adults.

Conclusion

The concept of professional development often includes an expectation of self-reflection and change in a staff member's philosophy, approach, or practices. The argument presented in this paper suggests that the influences that promote change derive from a range of sources. Efforts to portray these change processes might be compared to a complex weather map. One possible image is that of ripples of influence moving out from each change impetus (perhaps a conference or workshop). There are also staff members moving into the field of change with other experiences (the influence of formal study that has been undertaken elsewhere, activities of other regional support groups, and inservice activities with related challenges). The result is a process that is enriched and energized by diverse influences coming into a geographic area. Therefore, identifying all influences on professional growth of particular individuals is problematic. Principally, however, the process must involve inquiry, engagement, and agency, supported by recurring contextualized interaction.

In supporting a particular change, it is helpful when there is a "critical mass," a large number of people in an area who are all confronting and exploring similar aspects of their work. A specific change (e.g., related to constructivist planning) may be more likely to be sustained or extended into deep learning if there are opportunities for people to engage with waves of related ideas. Unfortunately, practitioners seem to be regularly assaulted with single unrelated inservice sessions on different ideas or topics, rather than having opportunities to revisit or consolidate new challenges. Perhaps more networking by inservice providers would help alleviate this problem, as would an explicit focus on providing concentric circles of opportunity.

This paper has suggested that versions of early childhood professional development that promote, for example, a move from being a "nonprofessional" to being a "professional" (VanderVen, 1988) are overly simplistic. The application of developmental stage theory to peoples' lives ignores the complexity of workplace circumstances and the role of interaction in supporting the social construction of staff professional knowledge. Work in the early childhood field is diverse and sophisticated; professional development opportunities for staff need to embrace complexity and move beyond narrowly focused instructional models of adult learning. The importance of a philosophy of staff ownership of ideas rather than transmission of knowledge is a critical component in conceptions of growth possibilities as multi-layered and fluid. Constructivist

perspectives acknowledge the unique contribution of the personal professional knowledge of individuals and the importance of the orientation of individuals both to their work and to new ideas. The conceptualization of professional empowerment through spirals of engagement provides possibilities for the field to consider as a direction for growth.

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